

"Before"

"Demystifying Declassification" Blog Post: Original Version

John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum

One of the most common questions that we hear from researchers is, "When will this document be declassified?" (sometimes expressed more plaintively as, "Why isn't this document declassified?"). Even for seasoned researchers, security classification can seem mysteriously opaque and may of hint of governmental cover-up or paranoia.

To dispel some of the mystery, our Declassification Unit describes here the process by which classified documents are opened to the public.

How is information declassified?

As a result of years of complaints, and the real need to balance open government with national security, President Clinton signed Executive Order 12958 in 1995. In a nutshell, the Order dictated the automatic declassification of all information 25 years or older, subject to very narrow exceptions. The staffs of the National Archives facilities were then required to organize a review of all of their holdings, implement a plan for their review for declassification, and then act on those declassification decisions. In the case of the Kennedy Library, when the initial executive order was signed in 1995, we needed to plan to review over a million pages of documents and over 200 hours of tapes* – it was daunting. But we forged ahead with the work over the next decade and a half, and at present we estimate we are waiting for the review returns on 300,000 pages and have 20 hours of recordings left to review. In the meantime, the executive order deadline has been extended several times, and currently the work continues under a new order (13526).

The concept of declassification review requires some explanation. The staff of the Declassification Unit spends its time on both "mandatory reviews" and "systematic reviews." "Systematic review" means what it sounds like: the Declassification staff begins at the beginning of a collection and reads each document, word by word, or listens completely to every tape, and applies the declassification guidelines that we have received from the agencies to this material. There are two types of possibly sensitive information that the staff might encounter:

- 1) Deed or Privacy. Less than 1% of the materials the Declassification staff deals with is subject to privacy protection.
- 2) National Security, of which there are three broad categories of potentially sensitive materials: a) Intelligence information; b) Nuclear weapons information; c) Information on or from foreign governments.

The guidelines mentioned above were issued in the early 1990s by various government agencies for materials from their particular agency. Using these agencies' guidelines, the Declassification staff reviews an item to determine if the subject matter is no longer considered national security classified information. If it is no longer sensitive, it is stamped as "declassified" and placed in the open stacks for researcher use. If it is deemed possibly still sensitive, then we submit a copy of the document to the agency or agencies that created or have what is called "equity" in the document. "Equity" is a metaphor borrowed from the financial sector and means that an agency is interested or invested in the fate of a

document. The agencies will determine the final review decision. If the document remains closed, a withdrawal sheet is created and placed in the open box for review by the researchers.

These sheets are the basis for the mandatory review (MR) process, which is how researchers can request a review of individual classified documents. Mandatory review began here at the Library in the early 1970s. The researcher uses the information on the withdrawal sheets to complete the [appropriate submission form](#). From that point on, the MR review is coordinated by our staff. The review steps are the same as in systematic—guidelines, in-house review, etc. We then submit to the agencies any items we cannot open in-house. Since many of the MR reviews involve submission to the agencies, the timeliness of the response to the researcher is out of our hands, although the implementation of the executive orders has dramatically improved the response times from the agencies.

Another term frequently used in conversation about declassification is RAC (Remote Archives Capture). Organizing review with all of the agencies is complicated, and the added pressure of the executive order mandate brought about a project to coordinate review among the agencies involved. The John F. Kennedy Library was the initial site selected for the RAC Project, in which a team of scanners visited the Library three times to scan classified documents in our holdings. The scans were then to be reviewed by the different agencies with equity in the documents and they would coordinate a decision under the executive order. Once the review was completed, the materials would be sent back to the Library for final review and opening, if applicable. The idea was to speed up review under the executive order by centralizing the reviews. The experience of the Kennedy Library was mixed.

As the pilot project, the Kennedy Library helped to work through major bugs within the RAC process. For example, the Declassification staff found, upon reviewing returned documents, that the RAC project participants simply upheld previously sanitized versions of documents without re-reviewing the information for declassification. Furthermore, we were often unable to determine what agencies had reviewed the item besides the agency for which it was scanned. Perhaps most importantly, the Declassification staff of the Kennedy Library has been responsible for conducting review on behalf of the Department of State. Since 75-80% of all of our documents contain State equity, and State did not participate in RAC until 2005, the result is that even with the RAC releases, the staff here still needed to review most of the documents one by one, page by page. Still, RAC has been a big help in the review process, especially with later reviews.

The declassification process can be puzzling to researchers at first, but under the executive orders signed by three Presidents, the American public is gaining access to more and more historical materials in a timely manner. Our job in the Declassification Unit of the Kennedy Library is to be the connection between the researchers who are interested in the documents and the agencies that created and now review the documents in the service of making the declassified information available to the public as quickly as possible.

*John F. Kennedy was not the only President to record Oval Office conversations, but they have been of particular interest to the public. For this and other reasons they represent a significant portion of the Kennedy Library's declassification work. They deserve, and will receive, their own blog post in the future.